How to Create a Successful Food Gardening Project

Creating a successful small scale food gardening project is a lot of fun…and quite a bit of work. The steps below helped us plan, implement, and monitor our projects in an organized system that worked well for everyone involved.

Step 1: The People

Developing a garden project is a people-intensive undertaking that requires enthusiasm, collaboration, knowledge, and time. Projects evolve due to the unique personalities and relationships that develop between the people who make it happen. Each contributor brings his or her own skills, talents, and ideas to create a successful outcome. Our folks were defined by the following categories: partners, participants, volunteers, mentors, and coordinators.

The Partners:
Partners are so important for a project bigger than a few gardens. Collaborating with others will give your project more exposure and increase its likelihood of success. Building a coalition with people or groups who share your goals combines resources to create a more powerful and effective force compared to working alone. For information on building a coalition see Appendix 1.

Partners may be individuals, groups, or organizations. They'll help you with many tasks from offering advice to providing supplies and labor. When looking for partners, carefully consider what your true needs are since projects can take on a life of their own and may lose their original intent. Partners may include:

- Community service organizations (Rotary, YWCA, Scouts, 4-H, etc.)
- Schools (primary, middle, and high schools, tech schools, colleges)
- Horticulture programs
- WSU Extension
- Churches
- Businesses (garden shops, lumber yards, compost/recyclers, hardware stores)
- Neighborhood associations
- Gardening enthusiasts/experts (clubs, master gardeners, Beautiful Backyards,)
- Hospitals
- Food banks
- Government and non-governmental agencies
- Parks and Recreation
- Community centers
- Volunteers (gardeners, laborers, organizers, etc.)

Our Story:

Clark County Public Health formed a coalition with partners from a local high school horticulture program, a faith-based organization, and a master gardener program. Between us, we found funding and leadership, built, installed and filled raised beds, and bought vegetable starts, seeds, and basic gardening supplies. We connected participants with experienced gardeners who supported and educated them through the summer and we collected input and documented the progress all along. We celebrated with a fabulous harvest potluck taking time to recognize and honor everyone involved. We evaluated surveys and our findings were written up, presented, and published.

Vaughn Andersen, Teacher
Lewis & Clark High school

Duane Sich, Director
Friends of the Carpenter

Bill Coleman, Master Gardener, with Aaron Glenn.

The Participants:
The participants are the folks for whom you are creating the gardens. They will become the new gardeners who will tend and harvest their own raised beds. Be sure that your participants understand that the success of their garden depends on their efforts and consistent attention. Some of them may have gardening experience while others may never have turned a spade. Experience doesn't matter but **commitment** does.
Participants will depend on the target audience for your projects. They may include:

- Singles
- Families
- Children, teens or adults
- Persons with disabilities
- Students
- Employees
- People with limited resources
- Immigrants
- People who are homeless
- People in recovery programs
- People who want to improve their health


Noe working his soil.

Outreach to participants can be challenging depending on how your project is designed. Apartment-based projects serving tenants simplifies outreach by only talking to those residents. Recruiting participants from more varied or mobile groups takes planning, collaboration, and persistence. If your project will be reaching out to people with low incomes, working with Head Start, WIC, or schools with a high percentage of free and reduced lunch may be effective. When engaging specific groups, ask people from those groups to be on your coalition to ensure respectful, successful outreach efforts.

Inviting potential participants to information meetings lets them to learn about the project and ask questions. Participants need to have a clear understanding of what signing up means so they'll know what's involved and how committed they are. Showing examples of the garden beds or posters of similar projects makes a project more real. If possible, ask previous participants to talk about their experiences. Serving fresh produce gives a taste of the possibilities. Salad greens, bread with herbed butter, and water flavored with cucumbers and mint is an easy, healthy menu.

Sending letters of invitation and participant covenants enhances outreach and tracks interest. The participant covenant is a promise to tend the garden all season and reminds them that their garden's success depends on their efforts. Templates for letters and covenants are in the Attachments.

The Mentors:
A mentor is a trusted friend, counselor or teacher, usually a more experienced person, who often has a powerful influence on the recipient's success. Mentors will educate and support participants from planting through harvesting and share ideas for using the produce. They will teach about composting, staking tomatoes, and protecting plants from critters and bad weather. Often mentors learn right along with participants. Match mentors with your gardeners early to give more time for getting to know each other and more effective teaching. Be mindful to match mentors with gardeners who live in the same areas when possible.

Training mentors goes beyond assuring that they know enough about gardening. The group served will dictate what kinds of skills and qualities mentors need to have. Participants may have unique situations mentors need to understand so both will be comfortable. There may be language barriers, significant cultural differences, differing work ethics and/or different mores around home maintenance. For a mentor/mentoree relationship to succeed, personal and lifestyle differences cannot interfere.

Melissa Harris mentoring new gardeners at Central Park Place.

Expectations of garden mentors:

- Enthusiastic about their mentoring role
- Non-judgemental towards others' backgrounds, skills, abilities, or situations
- Friendly, open, and willing to work with participants where they are
- Ability to teach and provide gentle, constructive guidance
- Dependable and reasonably available
- Passionate and knowledgeable about organic gardening

Recruiting enough qualified, dedicated mentors can be difficult. Mentors need not be "master gardeners" but must know about home-scale vegetable gardening. Training participants to become peer mentors is a way to avoid this potential problem in the future. Peer mentors have the advantage of being recently mentored themselves so they can readily pass on what did and did not work for them.

Recruit mentors via letters, phone calls, and posting notices in local gardening publications and on the internet. Possible places to find mentors may be:

- WSU's Master Gardener program
- Clark County's Naturally Beautiful Backyards program
- Local Garden Clubs
- Center for Agriculture and Science Environmental Education (CASEE) Center
- Community Gardens
- Horticulture Programs
- Gardening friends and family
- Volunteer services request

The Volunteers:
Few projects succeed without dedicated, passionate, reliable volunteers. A volunteer is someone who willingly works for others or the enviroment because they choose to do so without being motivated by money or gifts. For many, the emotional benefits of giving of themselves are satisfying, fulfilling, and sometimes healing. For a rewarding volunteer experience, be sure that your project is well organized and that volunteers are given specific, meaningful and timely tasks. Volunteers can help in many ways including:

- Outreach assistance (phone calls, presentations, letter writing)
- Labor (building and installing the beds, mixing soil)
- Running errands (picking up and delivering materials, lunch, etc.)
- Providing child care during meetings
- Administrative support (distributing & retrieving surveys, tallying data, etc.)

The Coordinator:
The coordinator is the one who pulls all the people, places, and things together into a common action or effort. This is a big role with many responsibilities. This position may be shared with a clear division of tasks to keep it manageable.

The coordinator(s) need not be an expert gardener but must understand all phases of your project and be able to get along well with everyone involved. Respectis earned by being well organized, assuring timely delivery of materials and supplies, and treating others' time, talents, and skills respectfully. A general coordinator outline is found in the appendix.

Step 2: The Places

Where to Site your Projects

One of the many beauties of small raised garden beds is their adaptability—one can fit into the tiniest postage-stamp yard or a group of them can fill a field. Your project may be one bed per home in a neighborhood or a cluster o beds in the common area of an apartment complex. Schools may choose to group beds around the campus while worksites may line their walkways. Parks and Recreation is a great connection for large projects in public spaces. The places you choose are as varied as the projects you design. The following are options to consider:

- Single homes/duplexes
- Apartment complexes
- Assisted Living facilities
- Residential Treatment Centers
- Child Care Centers
- Churches
- Work sites
- Correctional Facilities
- Neighborhoods
- Food Banks
- Community Centers
- Hospitals
- Libraries
- Parks
- Vacant lots /Parking Strips
- Storefronts/Businesses

ABC & 123 Preschool's garden

The gardens at Aurora Place

Once you decide on your participant group, the next step is to find a convenient location, preferably within wagon-dragging distance for everyone. It's hard to beat the convenience of one's own yard but the size and mission of your project may mean creating a community garden rather than individual home gardens. After you've found your spot, you'll need to figure out where on that place to put the beds. This, and lots of other basic gardening information, is found in Part 3: **A Garden Primer**.

Step 3: The Products: Supplies, Materials, and Plants

Books and Supplies

The basis of our gardening project is found in Mel Bartholomew's book All New Square Foot Gardening; Grow More in Less Space. We chose it because of its simple, efficient, and economic gardening methods and its easy, detailed instructions on building beds and how and why to make the planting mix. It is written in an easy-to-read format with many colorful pictures, helpful charts, and a glossary. The book is available in bookstores or may be ordered in bulk. See resources for information.

We kept supplies few and simple to show that gardening doesn't have to be expensive. Our gardener's kit included the book, a kneeling pad, a trowel, and gardening gloves for each family member. Excluding the book, all supplies were bought at local gardening centers for about $10-$15 per family depending on how many pairs of gloves they needed. Through the generosity of a local organization, many supplies were donated.

Materials for the Beds:

Our raised beds were made of untreated 2" x 6" cedar boards. Other woods will work and are less expensive but cedar lasts longer so is cheaper than replacements over time. It is NOT recommended to use pressure treated wood because chemicals might leach into to soil and be taken up by some plants. We used metal corner brackets to secure, square, and strengthen the boxes. Screwing the corners to stakes hammered into the ground added extra support.

All of our beds were 4'x 8' for consistency and simplicity. We doubled the 4'x 4' beds promoted by "All New Square Foot Gardening" so gardeners had more growing space. The size of the beds can easily be adapted to your project designs and spaces. For one of our participants with a back injury, we stacked extra boards to make it higher. Table-top beds can also be built or bought for people with physical limitations.

We used the weed cloth recommended in the book at first, but then chose to use newspapers and cardboard instead. These are free and break down overtime by worms and other bugs. Cardboard and newspapers are very effective weed barriers under soil and reusing them in this way keeps them out of the landfill.

Make grids that divide the beds into one foot squares. Our grids were made of 1 inch lath which is cheap and available in bundles of 50 from most lumber yards. Grids can also be made of sticks, bamboo, or even string strung from nails in the tops of the sides. If the garden is not divided like this, then it is NOT a square foot garden (SFG). We found the SFG method to be easy and very productive for our participants.

Heather proudly displaying her new square foot garden.

We partnered with Friends of the Carpenter (FOC), a local faith-based organization who uses wood working as a means of outreach. For a set fee, FOC provided wood, hardware, and labor for building and installing our beds. This was a win/win partnership which made our first project possible and provided income for a worthy organization. Donations of wood, hardware, and volunteer labor could lower project costs.

Jeff and Dennis of FOC installing yet another fine garden.

Materials for the Planting Mixture:
After the first year using a commercial garden soil mix, we decided to follow the planting mix recipe in Mel's book, All New Square Foot Gardening. His premise is to not waste time, money, and effort on making poor soil good, but instead start from the beginning with a great planting mix.

The recipe for "Mel's Mix" is equal parts peat moss, vermiculite, and a blend of five different kinds of compost. Peat moss aerates and lightens the mixture. Vermiculite's role is to hold moisture but proper watering will assure your plants get enough. We used half the recommended amount to reduce costs. The most important component is the blend of composts. Using a blend provides a better mix of nutrients so you won't need to add fertilizer. For big projects, mixing a yard of commercial compost in with bags of specific composts like mushroom, forest floor, and chicken or steer manure, makes a less expensive, well-rounded blend. Compost from kitchen waste is all the future amendment home gardens will need. See more about composting in the **Garden Primer**.

We followed the instructions for making Mel's Mix on site. Premixing large batches off site, then bagging it to be delivered to the gardens may cut time and decrease mess.

Jeff and Dennis preparing planting mixture.

The Plants:
Most of our plants came from Lewis & Clark High School's horticulture program. Be sure to order early so plants have time to grow. Then, schedule installations so that starts are ready to be planted when they need to come out of the greenhouse. Plants from a greenhouse will need time to adapt to the outdoors through a process called hardening off. Read more about hardening off in the **Garden Primer**.

Thriving plant starts in Lewis & Clark's greenhouse

We bought seeds and miscellaneous plants from local garden centers. Buy seeds on sale when possible, usually in late winter or early spring. Many seeds are good for several seasons so try old seeds as well. Choose disease-resistant plant varieties known to grow well in your area. Check the packet or tag for all kinds of information on plant needs.

Combination of plants from Lewis & Clark and a local garden center.

Step Four: The Process

Creating and implementing your first garden project can be quite involved. Below is a brief outline of how we did it. It is presented here as an outline for simplicity and clarity. Most of the activities are discussed in detail in the other sections of this toolkit and in the coordinator outline in the appendix. Some activities may occur in different order. For instance, does a coalition form around an idea to seek funding or does available funding determine the need for a coalition? Your own projects will dictate your steps.

10 Steps to Home-Scale Food Gardening Projects

1. Develop a general idea of what you want to do, for whom, and why
2. Secure funding and make a flexible, comprehensive budget
3. Build community buy-in; form a coalition if needed
4. Solicit, educate, and select all the players; match mentors with participants
    a. Partners
    b. Participants
    c. Mentors
    d. Volunteers
5. Order plant starts & gather all materials
6. Organize, schedule and monitor installations; take pictures
7. Monitor through season to provide encouragement, support, and appreciation for everyone involved; take lots more pictures and document progress
8. Plan and host a potluck celebration; take more pictures and thank everyone
9. Collect data and testimonials; evaluate and write up your project
10. Present project findings and experiences to any and all interested parties

Summer crop beds at Central Park Place

Step Five: The Celebration

The potluck celebration is the place for all to shine and share. For the gardeners, it is an opportunity to tell their stories, meet other gardeners, and to give back to the community by sharing their bounty of delicious produce. Mentors appreciate this time to enjoy the fruits of their mentorship. Organizers and partners come together in celebration of a project with results often beyond their initial goals and objectives.

Celebrations are detail-intensive so enlist the support of volunteers and delegate tasks among them. Begin planning the celebration by mid-summer. Find a central place with a kitchen and plenty of room to accommodate your guests and reserve it early. The Clark PUD community room was a great venue for our largest celebration. Community rooms at apartment complexes or churches may be better options for some projects.

Be sure to include *everyone* on the guest list: funders, officials, managers, directors, landlords, and business owners in addition to all gardeners, mentors, and volunteers. Send invitations at least three weeks in advance. Be sure that gardeners and mentors know to bring dishes made with produce from their gardens. To round out our menu, we provided bread, herb butter, desserts of locally grown fruit, and water flavored with mint and cucumbers. An invitation sample is included in the attachments.

Fun, informative displays can be made with pictures, and quotes from gardeners and mentors. We posted ours on tri-fold posters to stand alone. Laminating with clear contact paper is an inexpensive, effective way to preserve posters for future displays.

Awarding certificates of accomplishment and appreciation acknowledges individual efforts and contributions. When possible and appropriate, invite the media to cover your celebration. Take lots of pictures to document the event and for future presentations.

Ashley helping out at the 2007 potluck celebration.

Step Six: The Evaluation

Evaluating your project will provide much useful information to guide you in future projects. Input from participants and mentors is invaluable. How else will you know what worked, what didn't, what was missing, and what could have been better? Information about connections made during the project may lead to partnerships in the future which can cut costs, increase participation, and ease the process.

Since most funding is driven by data reflecting a need or results, it is very important to plan what information you want to collect and collect it in a way that you will give answers to your questions. We used a pre/post survey to gather baseline data to compare and measure changes in participants' gardening knowledge and skill levels as well as in their physical activity and nutrition. Soliciting both short and long answers provides a wealth of data from which to measure your success. Our mentors also completed surveys at the end to provide input on the process and to rate their satisfaction with participation.

Data can be compiled into reports for your funders, partners, and participants to illustrate project outcomes. The data from our projects was written into a report, and abstract, and articles for the newspaper and a professional journal. We pulled it all into a logic model which is a one-page illustration of a project from beginning to end. See our logic model in the appendix.